

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

Whew. Turning on the news lately has been rough. These are the kinds of times in which I often find myself examining my own sense of hope. Has it disappeared? If it is still there, is it strong? In what can any hope be rooted when news story after news story seems to defy its existence.

To still hope can seem childish; but in a recent conversation, a young person reminded me that we are supposed to come to God like little children. And I remind myself that hope is a practice, not an emotion. And that hope, like faith, is rooted in love.

The great commandment to love can seem a little silly in the face of the horror and the sorrow that we see day after day. Our own violence against our human kindred; our degradation of our kindred creation, has caused almost unimaginable suffering and continues to do so. So how can these commandments, to love God and our neighbour change what we are seeing around us? What can love possibly do?

These are the words of the writer Toni Morrison, from her book Paradise:

“Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody, or whether somebody likes you, or whether you can put up with somebody in order to get something or some place you want... or maybe you believe love is how forces or nature or luck is benign to you in particular, not maiming or killing... Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it... Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy, you are a fool. If you think it is natural, you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.”

Whenever I read Jesus’ words about love, I remember in particular that phrase that “Love is divine only and difficult always... It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.”

What an enormous task, what a daunting challenge, then, to hear the words of Jesus telling us that the great commandment is this one practice, this one learned application that can only come to and through us from God! We often think about what it means to BE loved; but what happens to

us when we learn TO love? What does it change in us, what does it mean for how we live as kindred to one another and as kindred to creation?

Practicing love can do so much that obeying the law cannot. In the past few Sundays of readings from the Gospel of Matthew, we've been listening to what Jesus taught in his last week of earthly ministry. He has triumphantly entered Jerusalem, overturned the tables of the money changers, and day after day has been teaching a great crowd gathered to hear him in the grand colonnade of the Temple. To what can the kingdom be compared? Should we pay taxes to Caesar? What does it mean to believe in resurrection? What does the teaching of Jesus mean for his followers? If God's intention for the human family is a vision of abundance, harmony, and yes, peace, how on earth do we get there? Jesus' questioners often turn to the law: How is Jesus' reading of the law faithful to God's vision for us? How do we act in accordance with that law? And in today's reading, Jesus gives an answer that is difficult and divine.

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus replied, “You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your thinking. This is the great and first commandment. But

there is a second which is like it: You are to love your neighbour as yourself. The whole law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Jesus is bringing his listeners to an understanding of faith that is about how we create relationship with one another, relationship that is bound together in our love of God. It is a faith that is not about rules. Practicing love transcends keeping the law; practicing love requires us to wrestle with our hearts, our souls and our understanding about how to be in right relationship with God and our neighbour. Practicing love means examining our interactions and encounters with our fellow human beings and our kindred creation through the lens of these commandments: Love God with your whole being; love your neighbour in the same way. Practicing love means coming to a divine understanding of what it means to care for self and for others; practicing love means leaving behind the merely human affections that can allow our own egos, our biases and our blindnesses to lead us to treat one another, our selves, and our kindred earth without the dignity due the image of God. Practicing love means wrestling with the decisions we make daily that will impact life, in all ways, great and small, and asking, does this build the coming kingdom? Does this lead a step

closer to God's vision of abundance, harmony, and peace? Practicing love means we cannot simply keep to a set of rules, but must in empathy and compassion do our best to understand the experience, the joy, the hurt of those around us, to bring ourselves into communion with each other, healing, feeding, teaching, and learning together so that we can as one body inherit life abundant and eternal. Practicing love means that we must bear witness, in the face of injustice, to the vision of God of a human family united in peace.

We have been given a commandment meant to renew the earth and all that is in it. It is a commandment whose practice forms us into co-workers, co-creators with God of God's vision for the human family and for our kindred creation. Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your thinking. This practice is divine and difficult; it is vexing and joyous; it is frustrating and sublime; and it is our only means of keeping alive the hope that is in us to be a new creation in Christ Jesus. May we be faithful, hope-filled practitioners; and may God's holy reign come. Amen.